

Making Sense *of* Menopause

Harnessing the Power and
Potency of Your Wisdom Years

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Introduction

Menopause

It's Not What You Think

There is something infinitely healing in the repeated refrains of nature—the assurance that dawn comes after night, and spring after the winter. —Rachel Carson

There is a cultural belief in the West that menopause is an unavoidable horror. Prepare yourself, dig in, because this is going to be a wild ride. The hot flashes, sleep deprivation, fatigue, brain fog, hair loss, and the sense that everything is falling apart are seen on the horizon, headed for us, and we dread it. We feel helpless. These are the stories we hear and the way many women experience menopause, perhaps because it is what we are expecting. But why should this be so? Why would Nature create our bodies to suddenly unravel and leave us feeling lost and diminished, just when we are in the prime of our lives?

In a woman's biological story, the times of hormonal change are often a bit challenging to navigate. Things are shifting on a deeper level than just our bodies and we know this intuitively. We tend to think of ourselves as the same person throughout our life, someone that changes are happening *to*. But in a very real sense, our hormones literally change us into a different being at each juncture of our life as a woman. In the same way that a caterpillar and butterfly

have exactly the same DNA but are very different creatures, we also go through a metamorphosis at times of hormonal change and do best if we embrace our new state of being rather than resisting or just trying to adapt. All of these times of change in our lives fit together and build, one upon the other. So, in order to navigate our menopause, we must also understand the earlier phases of our lives and how they connect to what is happening now, because they impact strongly what kind of menopause we will experience.

Unfortunately, menopausal women in Western culture are marginalized, made to feel “less than”; and make no mistake, cultural expectation is *very* powerful. For example, I once read about a primitive culture that held the belief that when women stopped menstruating they would die, so the women in that tribe menstruated well into their seventies. Their bodies complied. Whether or not the story is actually true, the principle is. In cultures where social status increases after menopause and there is no negative connotation to elderhood, women do not experience what we think of as menopausal symptoms to the same degree that Western women do, if at all. In other words, our bodies, minds, and beliefs are *one*.

In Western culture, the dominant message is that our bodies will betray us. In our profit-driven health-care system, disease is marketed to us in such a way that we see it waiting around every corner, and we often see the smallest symptoms in our bodies as harbingers of life-changing dysfunction. We buy this message because many of us are no longer in touch with what is true about our bodies.

We live in the midst of so much “noise chaos.” We are asked to keep up with multiple times the tasks and amounts of information than we were even twenty years ago, and women in menopause today still remember older ways of being. We adapt, but we are aware of how much more we have to hold now. In today’s world,

we so rarely have the quiet, in our minds and bodies, to remember who we are. In this book, I invite you to stop for a minute, take a breath, and remember that Nature has a plan.

Nature—What Was She Thinking?

Nature provides each species with a blueprint for its unfolding, from the first moment of its existence. We watch birds, fish, and butterflies migrate across the globe with unerring accuracy to places they have never been. We watch flowers bud, blossom, and then wither in order to bear fruit. When we step back and watch from a distance, we can see that Nature's plan is elegant and systematic, but we don't trust it in the same way when it applies to our own bodies. We have been *taught* to fear death and aging.

Human physical, spiritual, and intellectual development also unfolds according to a plan, with each stage building upon the last, but from where we stand as individuals, we can only see where we are and have been. Having mentors and models who show us the way can help, but we are generally either past- or present-focused in terms of what we would say that we actually *know* or have mastered. Change is hard, and contemplating the future or the unknown, particularly in our current culture, carries an undercurrent of anxiety or fear for most people.

One aspect of Nature's unfolding program in humans is what we call aging. There are those who would say that, theoretically, we shouldn't *have* to age, that we have systems for regeneration in the body, if we just knew how to use them. (All cells in the body are made new on a constant basis, after all.) However, most of us are watching the lines form, the gray hair come in, and gravity take hold, and feeling a sense of inevitability about it. Some women feel despair.

When it comes to aging, not many of us are able to embrace and embody it. Most of us try to ignore it at best, come to fear it at

worst, and that fear can put our bodies in survival mode, causing stress hormone levels to rise and putting forces into motion that actually quicken the physical signs of aging. To embrace and work with Nature's program as it unfolds is an option less taken but one that carries with it a sense of balance and rightness. I invite you to engage with this in a powerful way—to be open to the unknown and what you might find, to tell yourself the truth, and to receive the gifts this will certainly bring.

While Nature's plan for women is the same across the species, the journey we each make is a personal one. How we feel about being a woman in midlife (and beyond) is influenced by many things: our past experiences, the culture we live in and learn to define ourselves by, and the role models we have for aging, as well as the messages of our medical and religious communities that teach a separation between body and soul that doesn't serve us when we are working toward integration. In the West, we live in a culture that deifies youth and in which status is based on "looking good." What that means to each woman might differ, depending on the circle in which she travels. "Looking good" might be based on physical looks, the things she acquires, the power she wields, or her ease in different social situations.

As we will see in the following chapters, our individual stories as to how we experience menopause and aging actually begin in the womb. In fact, they begin in the three months prior to our conception. Understanding the path of our individual journey, and untangling ourselves from the various roles and identities we have inhabited in our lives up to this point, goes a long way toward bringing us to a place of authenticity and thriving during menopause and beyond. This in turn lessens symptoms and anxiety and provides us with a strong place to stand in the world.

So, while it might seem odd in a book about menopause to first read about how we come to be female and experience puberty and

menstruation, it *is* relevant because our earliest experiences really do shape our menopause. This journey begins at the beginning.

The Journey

As a Nurse Midwife, I have cared for women through all phases of their lives. However, my practice for the last twenty years has been focused on working with women in the menopausal transition, and there is a common shape to the journey. When a woman first comes into my office, she is often feeling desperate. She is experiencing changes to her body, mood, sleep patterns, libido, and ability to focus. She is also vaguely aware that there is a deeper sea change happening, that something bigger than her symptoms is at work under the surface. A raw power is rising up, but it feels out of control and very different from what has come before. This adds to her anxiety. She may fear that her body is irretrievably broken. She is looking for answers, for relief, and at least for the moment, to be “fixed.” She wants things to be the way they were, even if they weren’t great, because at least they were familiar, something she knows she can cope with.

I remind her that her life as a woman is a continuum and one that is very much influenced by hormonal status. I suggest that she reflect on what her responses were during other times of major hormonal shift in her life. If she is like most women, there was likely a sense of being off-balance, not knowing who she was anymore, not knowing what this new role would ask of her or how to navigate it. Yet once the transition was made, she found her feet and moved forward to inhabit the next phase of her life. I remind her that Nature has a plan in place for us, as it does for all beings in the world, and we can look forward to it with curiosity and anticipation. I remind her, “You’ve got this. You have so much to draw on and everything you need to become the next best version of yourself.”

Many of you reading this book might be in a similar place. You want to make sense of what is happening to you, you want to feel *normal* again, but you don't yet have a sense of what that new normal might be. It can be a very scary place to be, especially without cultural support. This book will help you.

Remember, Western medicine generally wants to isolate and “fix” our symptoms. It sees menopause as an inevitable failure of the fertility system. Yet menopause is not something to be “fixed” or even something that *can* be fixed. It is a natural process, not a syndrome, and an initiation—physical, emotional, and developmental—that each of us as women must go through. We bring to that process who we are, by way of our personal histories and methods of coping. Our histories and experiences shape not only *what* happens but also how we respond to it, how long it will last, and what the outcomes will be. Once women begin to really explore their journeys through childhood, girlhood, and womanhood, they generally find that their ways of being, their problems, whatever is yet “undone” in their lives become amplified and distilled during this time.

Menopause truly is a crossroads. Women will generally either embrace it and move through it thriving, or begin to slowly diminish. This is why our individual stories are so important, and why it is important for women to tell them, if they are going to heal whatever is undone in their lives and bring themselves whole into the next phase. We need to hear one another's stories, learn from them, and realize that we are not alone.

I always make sure that the women I work with have an opportunity to tell and explore their stories, and that they have someone to listen to them. Healing cannot occur without that. The old adage “Wherever you go, there you are” is never more true than when talking about menopause. How a woman frames the events of her life, what her expectations are, and how willing

she is to be vulnerable and explore past patterns that no longer serve her have huge implications for her in terms of how she will experience menopause and navigate the rest of her life.

In addition, her lifestyle and stress levels will have a direct impact on symptoms. For one woman, minor lifestyle adjustments or a small dose of hormone to help her get back into balance is all she needs; she feels “herself” again. Another woman, with a different history, may need an extended period of working on adrenal health and some more serious lifestyle changes before she begins to feel more normal. For yet another, therapy or some other form of process work to complete unfinished business or resolve past trauma is what makes the difference. Sadly, some women address none of this, experience hot flashes and other symptoms into their seventies, and never truly feel well again. But it doesn’t have to be that way.

How a woman feels about her female identity, what stories she has been told, the presence or absence of sexual trauma—all of these things will affect a woman’s experience of menopause and the degree to which she experiences symptoms. So, following the breadcrumbs from our earliest life can highlight where symptoms originate from and allow us to better target the work that needs to be done to bring ourselves whole to the next part of our journey. The Going Deeper sections of this book are designed to help you do this.

The Fruits of the Journey

Midlife can be a time of deepening insight, increased confidence, freedom from reproductive concerns; a creative time when there is an intersection of wisdom and creativity that Nature supports; a time to give our gift to the world. In fact, anthropologists tell us that grandmothers furthered the evolution of our species. Once women survived long enough to be grandmothers, they gathered

the most food. They also had the time and patience to teach children and the life experience to contemplate consciousness beyond survival, waking up a totally different part of the human brain.

One thing is certain: menopause is a critical juncture. It is a point at which women generally decide to move forward and embrace their elderhood and the wisdom they have accumulated or they begin to give up and fade away.

I have found that most women, once their symptoms are under better control and they have the emotional bandwidth again, *want* to do the work that will help them catch up to present time, to find out what is authentic for them *now* and how they want to express this going forward. They want to live vibrant lives into their elder years. This doesn't just happen, though. This, too, is a process that requires attention.

Sifting through how we became who we are and what the stories are that we have been living is a powerful, engaging, and profoundly moving process. It is *important* that we look back through our lives to honor and assess, grieve and celebrate the things we have been, done, and lost. We cannot fully become the “next thing” without that. However, ours is not a culture that knows how to grieve or that supports grieving, except in the most private of places. Too many women stay trapped in the loss and are unable to move on to the next phase—fully inhabiting themselves and opening to the incredible richness that midlife and elderhood can bring. We cannot do this work effectively while we are in the midst of a downward spiral. We first need to support ourselves back to balance.

This book gives you the tools and opportunity to do both—to understand what is happening in your body and to take some steps to rebalance it. Throughout the course of the book, we will explore the overall arc of a woman's biological life, where menopause fits into this, and how each of the passages we have already completed impacts our menopause. We will see how each of our former tran-

sitions relates to and informs what we are going through now and how Nature prepares us for each phase. We will explore what we can do to care for ourselves, lessen symptoms we might be having, and come back to a place of balance and equilibrium.

Perhaps even more important, we will begin to explore our stories, because our earliest experiences and the stories we have used to frame our identities largely inform what kind of menopause we will experience, not our genetics. Looking at our personal stories helps us remember who we have been, and from there to see who we are now, what is authentic to our truest selves at this juncture, and what is not. Knowing that and catching up to present time allows us to move into this next phase of our lives whole, knowing what we want from it and what we wish to give. Elderhood can be the most powerful phase of our lives, and as we will see going forward, allows us to shape our culture and those who come after us.

How to Use This Book

This book is structured so that you can use it in whatever way meets your needs best at this time. The story of each step along the biological path of a woman's life is presented first, and how it relates to where you are now. How Nature's plan unfolds to prepare us for each new phase is a fascinating story that may surprise you. These sections will help you understand what is happening in your body and provide ways that you can work with what is happening to create vibrant health for yourself, wherever you are along that path.

Working with the Going Deeper sections at the end of each chapter will help you understand your personal journey, where you have come from, and what people and experiences have been most potent in shaping the way you think of yourself and the way you present in the world. These sections take you a little deeper into some of the issues we have discussed in each chapter and how they relate to your life.

Being aware of your own trajectory will help to increase your understanding of where you currently stand in terms of your health and the issues you face. Seeing the path that brought you to where you are now will help you make the adjustments that will ensure vibrancy in your future. It can also help you to be more compassionate and accepting of your current situation, which is invaluable when trying to make change.

Some of these questions may attract you; some may hold no draw at all. There is no right way to approach them. You might decide to start a journal in which to write down what information you find and your responses to it. If you are comfortable, talk with your mother or other family members about the questions pertaining to your early life. See what information they can provide and what their experiences were. Then see what floats to the surface. If you have a trusted friend or therapist, you might choose to talk about what feelings arise in you based on what you find out. You might have a group of women with whom you wish to explore this journey, and there are a wealth of benefits to doing this work in a group. Hearing the stories of others and receiving accurate mirroring helps bring perspective and compassion.

I have clients who work with this information by just thinking about it, and those who decide to write or make art that reflects their journey. For some, an “aha” moment that comes from something they find out completely changes the way they understand an experience or some old pattern they are held by. Whatever you choose to do with it, this knowledge creates a framework and context that you can use to look at your current state of being, and from there you can move forward. I would encourage you to move toward what speaks to you and set aside some contemplative time for this process.

There is no rush, and this inquiry yields the best results if you engage with it slowly and only engage when you have the emotional